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On Being a Superpower

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BOOK REVIEWS

A SCENARIO OF THE FUTURE

Deitchman, Seymour. *On Being a Superpower*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2000. 335pp. \$32

This self-characterized “think piece” about the future of U.S. national security is the stuff of war college curricula, brought to us by one of the nation’s leading thinkers and practitioners on the subject. Seymour Deitchman here describes a likely world into which the only superpower will be thrust and offers some reasonable and insightful advice for maintaining this preeminence.

Military planners routinely concoct scenarios of future wars to illustrate the types of strategy and forces that would most likely be effective in overcoming projected enemies. Deitchman uses this technique with great skill to depict the requirements of a U.S. global security strategy. His scenarios for each part of the world are designed to leave anyone who has ever worked in national security affairs with sweaty palms. However, all such scenarios are merely educated guesses, often created to support the author’s predispositions and conclusions.

The value of envisioning a particular future lies primarily in the stimulation of new ways of seeing and thinking about a problem, rather than in any predictive accuracy. These scenarios are intended to

rattle one’s comfortable mindset. That is, while no single element of any of them is implausible, that any one could unravel as unfortunately as these do stretches credulity. Deitchman does recognize that any of his assumptions may be “ridiculously wrong” by the time the book is published, and he is absolutely right on this score.

Deitchman has his biases, and he is not ashamed of them. He is an internationalist, and does not shy away from the necessity for the U.S. military to conduct military operations other than war. He does not favor national missile defense, for both technical and political reasons. However, Deitchman’s most controversial contention is that there will be only a few overseas bases and that these bases will always be “politically” vulnerable to limitations by the host country. Indeed, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM vindicated this claim, as we saw Army and Air Force participation limited for some time to Special Forces, strategic bombers, and long-range refueling assets. This postulate about overseas bases leads Deitchman to the conclusion that naval forces (i.e., the Navy and Marine Corps) should dominate the future American

military. He devalues by this logic large portions of ground and tactical air forces supplied by the Army and Air Force, particularly in recognition of likely diminishing defense budgets. He is not opposed to joint warfare. He supports all the catchphrases (dominant maneuver, precision engagement, full-dimensional protection, focused logistics) popularized in the chairman's Joint Vision documents. He just feels that, provided space and information superiority, the sea services can execute the bulk of this strategy.

While Deitchman argues that the book is *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*, its strongest points are its prescriptions for developing a rational and affordable national military strategy. In particular, his arguments for the development of technology-driven armed forces with information superiority are compelling. His case against "lean" armed forces and overreliance on the civilianization of military jobs is equally powerful.

Deitchman's principal contribution to the strategic debate is his approach to handling two major regional contingencies (MRCs), if required. He opts to build technologically sophisticated and highly maneuverable conventional forces to address any military challenge (or to fight one MRC) while explicitly threatening a nuclear "rain of destruction" on anyone irresponsible enough to attack American vital interests while the United States is so occupied. As a true strategist, he thereby matches "ends" to "means" by allowing himself the opportunity to reduce the size of the relatively expensive conventional forces.

A large portion of the book is a seemingly unnecessary primer on America and the "exceptional" traits that either explain its greatness or foretell its doom. Whether or not the American education system is

fundamentally flawed or Americans are losing their work ethic obviously are debatable points. However, Deitchman's insistence that the United States engage in this self-examination is useful and meaningful. Most monographs on national security simply skip over this realm and presume the solution.

Deitchman forces the reader to delve deeper and to understand the social, economic, and psychological forces underpinning American security strategy. It is a journey well worth taking, even though a reader may disagree with the author as often as not.

Unless one is fortunate enough to spend a year at one of the nation's war colleges contemplating this subject, there is no better way to view the process of developing U.S. national strategy than to spend some time with this book.

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Tucker, Jonathan B. *Scourge: The Once and Future Threat of Smallpox*. Berkeley, Calif.: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001. 304pp. \$26

In real estate, the three most important things are "location, location, location." In nonfiction book writing, the counterpart is "timing, timing, timing." The publication of *Scourge* in early September 2001 could not have been more timely. The book is not a rapidly compiled, superficial response to the attacks of 11 September but an in-depth study of smallpox. Jonathan B. Tucker traces the history of the disease from ancient Egypt through India to China, where it was called "Hunpox," apparently because it was believed to have been imported by the Huns. Smallpox, we are reminded,